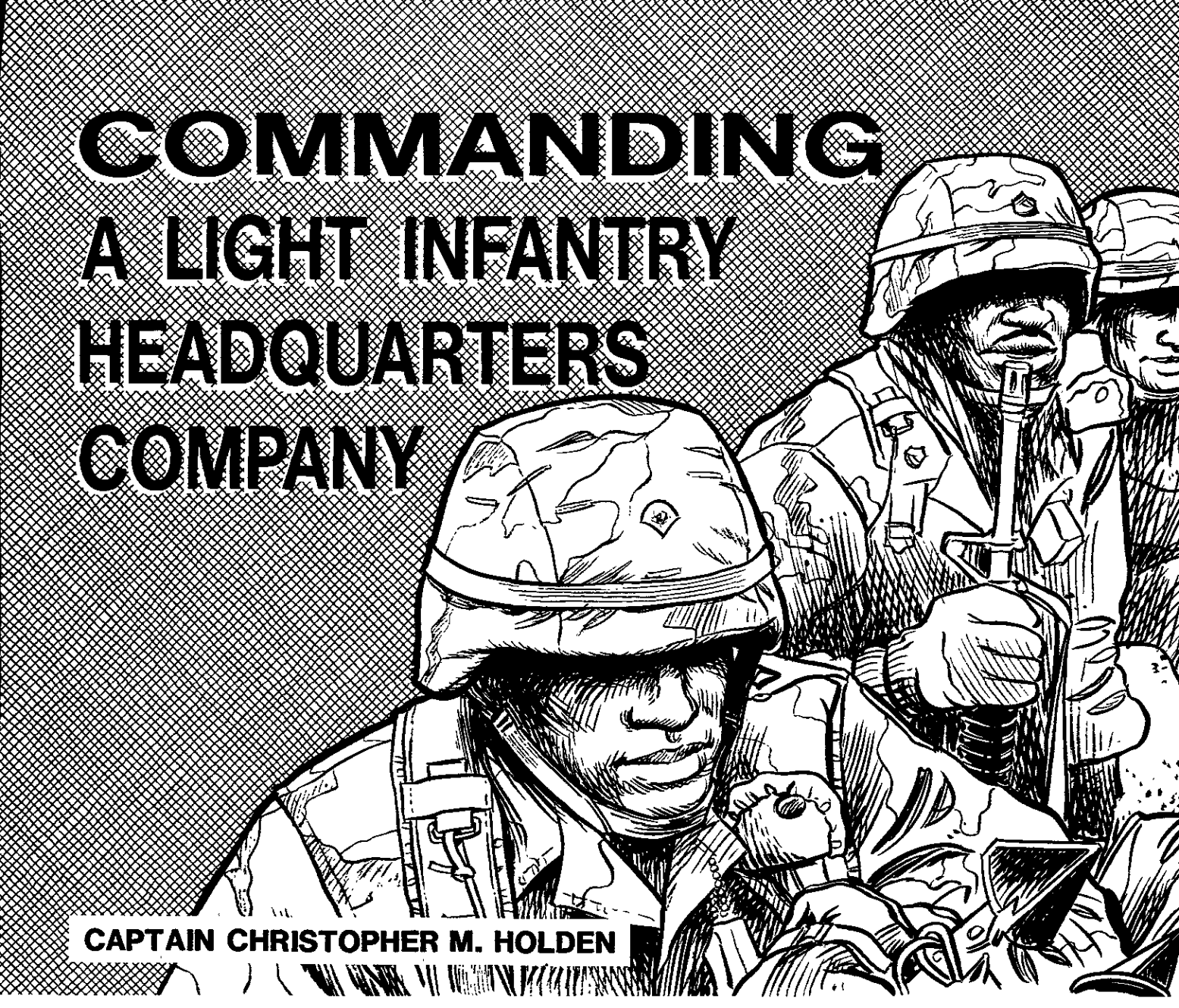
COMMANDING A LIGHT INFANTRY HEADQUARTERS COMPANY



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When I took command of a headquarters company, I thought to myself, "How in the world will I ever train such a diverse group of soldiers?" The company included scouts, antitank crews, medics, mortarmen, support platoon drivers, communications men, staff soldiers, and those in the headquarters section.

Commanding a rifle company had been easy compared to this. Ninety-five percent of the soldiers were in MOS 11B. We all trained together—we had a common mission essential task list (METL). My military experience and schooling had all focused on commanding a rifle company. I had found good articles that included sample plans for rifle company command. *(Two of those were in the September-October 1988 issue of INFANTRY: "On Company Command," by Captain Richard D. Hooker, Jr., and "A Plan for Command," by Captain Danny W. Davis.)*

As a headquarters company commander, though, I found little material to tell me, for example, where I should locate myself in the field, what my relationship with the battalion staff should be, or how to train my specialty platoons.

During the next 15 months, through numerous field exercises, a deployment to the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Chaffee, some ego-bruising lessons, and some good teachers, I found answers that worked for me and my battalion. I discovered that an HHC commander cannot lead the same way as a rifle company commander. To accomplish his mission, he must determine whether a task should be executed in a centralized or a decentralized fashion. To build teamwork and cohesion, he must establish a mutually supportive relationship with the battalion staff.

On the basis of what I learned, I would like to offer some advice to those of you who will command headquarters companies.

To gain a better understanding of the way an HHC works, let's examine first what I believe should be your top priority, and that is training!

Training

Read Field Manual 25-101. Although the HHC's training mission is more diverse than that of a rifle company, the principles discussed in the manual are the same. In their INFANTRY articles, Captains Hooker and Davis stressed the importance of the chain of command, counseling, training, administration, and maintenance from a rifle commander's view, but the HHC has some idiosyncrasies.

The relationship I tried to nurture with the HHC platoon leaders was different from the one I had with my rifle company leaders. I gave them more responsibility and initiative in planning their own training, so long as they followed their METL and mission training plan (MTP) standards. The specialty platoon leaders coordinated for their own training resources and kept me informed of their progress or problems.

I had to remember that my platoons would fall under battalion control as soon as the battalion was given a mission. Consequently, my first objective was to train the platoons to be combat-ready.

I initiated the performance appraisal system with my platoon leaders by giving them copies of my OER support form and allowing them a couple of days to complete theirs. Immediate follow-on counseling sessions included reviewing the OER support form and making sure each objective was measurable.

Then, instead of leading from a desk, I spent two or three days with each platoon in the field. Fortunately, my battalion held a platoon field training exercise (FTX) a couple of weeks after I assumed command. My specialty platoons, except for the medical platoon, served as an opposing force against the line platoons. This gave them all a chance to exercise the tasks on their METLs, and gave me a chance to observe them.

I conducted an insertion behind enemy lines by UH-60 helicopter with the scouts. I operated as a TOW gunner with the antitank platoon during battle drill competitions. I served as gunner, ammunition bearer, and computer check during the mortar platoon's live fire. I went with the medical platoon during a night casualty evacuation exercise. The communication platoon gave me classes on their systems while I taught them the rudiments of defense.

I even managed to catch up with the support platoon long enough to listen to their concerns and offer assistance. Their major problem involved a lack of qualified drivers. In fact, when they did receive an 11B infantryman from one of the rifle companies, it was too often one with a background of disciplinary problems. Soon afterward, I went to the command sergeant major to ask if we could begin getting higher quality soldiers assigned to the support platoon.

All of these experiences gave me an excellent opportunity to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each platoon, to acknowledge their problems, and also to earn some respect from the soldiers. I got a first-hand look at their METL and at the way they incorporated the MTP into their training. I also earned the qualification needed to critique them. I served as mentor to each platoon leader and counseled him formally after each FTX. I did the same with the executive officer and the first sergeant.

The training meeting proved to be the most important event in the company. I used FM 25-101 as a guide and held my training meetings the day after the battalion's so I could compile my notes and make sure I could pass along current, accurate information. The platoon leaders and platoon sergeants, staff section NCOs in charge, the first sergeant and XO, and commodity area managers attended.

During these meetings, we developed our plan for getting 100 percent of the soldiers in the company to complete a task, whether it was shots, weapon qualifications, or an NBC battle run. This was always a training challenge. For example, I could not just set up one M16 range, pass out the information during a training meeting, assign a platoon to run the range, and expect good results. I had to run the range on at least two days, maybe three, to qualify all of the company. The first sergeant talked about the range weeks in advance and reminded the company daily to ensure that the platoon sergeants and section NCOs in charge (NCOICs) accounted for all their people. On the range days, I went to the staff areas and made sure leaders released their soldiers to go to the range to shoot. Then we tabulated all results at the end of each day to determine who did or did not qualify. For those who failed to qualify, we repeated the process. Other tasks require similar planning, executing, and follow-up. During all this, the first sergeant and I always had to remember to be patient and to maintain a sense of humor.

In preparing for the JRTC, we spent a lot of time in the field. As a result, my platoons were able to win (and lose) a lot of battles, learn by their mistakes, and become better light fighters. To design training and establish standards, HHC leaders need to train extensively with the following MTPs—7-90, Mortar Platoon; 7-91, Antitank Platoon; 7-92, Scout Platoon/Sniper Team; and 7-94, Headquarters Company.

Physical training in HHC, as in any infantry unit, provides the foundation for mentally and physically tough soldiers. The soldiers in my company did their best PT when it was decentralized down to platoon level. The various soldiers in MOS 71M of the personnel administration center (PAC), for example, may not need to run as fast or as far as the scouts. They have different METLs and different physical needs. Consequently, I incorporated the following physical training into the program:

Monday—Platoon calisthenics and a run of 3.5 to 4 miles.

Tuesday—Organized platoon athletics.

Wednesday—Platoon calisthenics and a run of 3.5 to 4 miles.

Thursday—Foot marches of various distances (4 to 12 miles) or NCO and officer development programs, depending on the training cycle.

Friday—Company calisthenics and 4-mile run.

The platoon calisthenics were done at the same general location. Each platoon leader designed his own program and presented it to me for approval at every quarterly training brief. The staff sections rotated responsibility for the PT formations. The first sergeant, company XO, and I did PT with the sections in rotation. I used Friday sessions to compare everyone's PT level, as well as to build company unity.

PT accountability proved to be a major concern. The first sergeant and I monitored details, taskings, and last-minute staff crises. The platoon and section sergeants explained each absence to the first sergeant. I cannot overemphasize the command priority you need to place on accountability if you want to run a good PT program.

The decentralized approach was ideal for all the specialty platoons. Each platoon significantly increased its average scores on the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT). The only disadvantage I observed concerned the staff sections: There were many instances, despite numerous corrections, in which the selected staff section PT instructor failed to have a plan for executing the exercises. The staff section performed better under the centralized approach to training.

Battalion Staff

Paramount to your success as an HHC commander is a mutually supporting relationship with the battalion staff. Although they are all members of your company, the battalion commander, executive officer, and S-3 outrank you. If you do not recognize your special role and responsibilities, this can be a potentially uncomfortable and career-threatening situation. Their primary purpose is running the battalion, not serving the HHC. You must therefore cultivate a rapport between the company and the staff, and each has to support the other.

I paid daily visits to each staff during garrison days to talk over problems, first from their perspective and then from the company's, and this formed the framework for resolving conflicts. For example, one morning only three staff representatives showed up at a PT formation. I knew from my daily visits that most of the staff members wanted to do PT but that if one of them was given a short suspense project to complete, PT time was the only time he would have available in which to do it.

A little tact is needed in this situation. Avoid going behind their backs and telling the XO who was or was not at PT today. Instead, go directly to the staff sections and persuade them to get back to it. I always felt that directly addressing the accountability problem was the beginning of a solid relationship. Of course, you can use their future attendance at PT as a gauge of how firm you have to be.

One of the most important steps toward gaining a mutually supporting relationship with the battalion staff members is to start building a rapport with the battalion XO. Visit him in his office or, better yet, invite him to some of your company training to find out what his main concerns are. And go to his battalion XO meetings. I found this an excellent way of finding out in advance about maintenance, training support, and administrative problems in the battalion that I might be able to handle. This provides another forum for making people aware of your requirements, as you also become aware of the staff's requirements. If the problem dealt only with the S-3 section, I would go over and talk to the S-3. A solid relationship with the battalion XO and S-3 will pay big dividends for your company later on.

You might also invite the staff personnel to attend all company award presentations, end-of-the-week "safety talk" formations, and social get-togethers. The simple fact of the matter is that when I got involved with staff activities, and they paid attention to company business, such problems as the lack of staff personnel in PT sessions decreased.

Field Responsibilities

Doctrine dictates that a light infantry HHC commander be in the field trains. Still, the battalion commander must evaluate the experience and talents of the HHC commander, the first sergeant, and the XO, along with the battalion S-1 and S-4, to determine everybody's responsibilities. Because each battalion has its own distinctive talents, I am not recommending that all battalions do what we did, but it worked for us—after a few mistakes and a few lessons learned.

After I had spent time with my platoons, the battalion commander put me in charge of the field trains. After a couple of field exercises, I had a field trains SOP. We practiced establishing the defense and displacing and coordinated with the combat service support slice elements. Then boredom set in. I knew the mission was important but, as a former

rifle company commander, I wanted to contribute more to the battle. I pleaded with the battalion commander to let me come forward. He acquiesced and put me in charge of the main CP.

Inherent in this responsibility was establishing the main CP defense, serving as the quartering party officer, and helping the S-3 and the battalion XO with current future planning. I planned and executed main CP defense battle drills and rehearsals. I ensured that all vehicles were tactically parked and that everyone knew the proper passwords. I always received one rifle squad to secure the CP and accompany me on quartering parties. But most important I was up forward to observe and talk with my platoon leaders. Back in the field trains, I could not keep abreast of their actions. At the main CP, the platoon leaders, now under battalion control, used me as a sounding board before backbriefing the battalion commander. They told me their problems, and I exercised my command influence where it was needed.

The obvious disadvantage to having the HHC commander forward is that the battalion commander has to select another competent leader to take charge of the field trains. The choice is either the S-1, the S-4, or the command sergeant major. Normally the S-1 and the S-4 are in the combat trains, and their respective NCOICs are in the field trains. One option is to place one of the NCOICs forward in the combat trains while his officer counterpart goes to the field trains. Again, obvious advantages and disadvantages are involved.

Our battalion commander experimented by putting the command sergeant major in charge of the field trains. Of course, the obvious disadvantage was not having his experience forward. But to help him, the battalion effectively used the HHC first sergeant as the field trains NCOIC. Having a strong HHC first sergeant is another variable in determining who should run the field trains. My first sergeant implemented the defense plan and guard schedules but, most important, made sure everyone in HHC received a meal. That sounds a lot easier than it really is, especially getting chow to the scouts forward, or trying to figure out the HHC headcount at the main CP, which in our case included battalion attachments from our slice units.

Even if the first sergeant is extremely competent, as ours was, a field trains officer in charge is still needed to coordinate effectively with the support elements in the rear. I recommend selecting the S-1, providing, of course, that his NCO assistant demonstrates the responsibility and initiative to monitor the personnel situation from the combat trains.

The battalion commander has to consider many variables in determining his HHC commander's field role. The following are some of the lessons we learned at the JRTC about using the HHC commander at the main CP.

• The HHC commander should not be used as an "ad hoc" commander. Putting the HHC commander in charge of a counter-reconnaissance team or a tank killer team just does not work. For instance, if he is in charge of a team composed of the antitank platoon, four Dragon teams, and a rifle platoon and is ordered to conduct counter-reconnaissance during a battalion defense, whose SOP do they use? And how does he communicate? He doesn't have an assigned radio or operator. While the HHC commander is trying to establish communications, an effective chain of command, and an SOP, he is losing precious time that he could be using for troop leading procedures (TLPs).

• All battalion staff and slice elements must know the main CP defense plan. This is a challenge. In a rifle company, everyone generally executes the same TLP at the same time. At the main CP, some soldiers are fighting the current battle, some are planning the future battle, and some are on their rest shift. Drawing all the fighting positions, sectors of fire, minefields, and the like, on butcher paper is one way to familiarize these soldiers with their defense plan.

I quizzed all the soldiers, before the breakfast and dinner meals, on all aspects of the defense. I then inspected their ammunition status, the zero on their MILES devices, and the challenge and password procedures. Then, after coordinating for the least disruptive time with the battalion XO and S-3, I conducted defense rehearsals until all the soldiers knew their responsibilities.

• Be prepared to manage limited assets. (Finding transportation to the battalion commander's location or the main CP for a battalion meeting challenges most rifle company commanders.) A good solution is for the HHC commander to find out from the battalion commander when he wants to talk to all the commanders, then coordinate a link-up with the rifle company commanders using one of the available company vehicles. This not only saves time but allows the company commanders to share experiences and build teamwork.

As a side note, many of the lessons suggest the need for modifications to the TOEs (tables of organization and equipment). For instance, an assigned vehicle, a communication system, and a radio telephone operator and driver would help the HHC commander coordinate link-ups with his fellow commanders for battalion meetings. Additionally, if the battalion commander still elected to have his headquarters commander in charge of an ad hoc team, this equipment would be essential for command and control.

Maintenance

In a rifle company, the executive officer serves primarily as the logistics coordinator, but my XO was also the battalion maintenance officer (BMO). Since HHC has all the battalion's vehicles, and a light infantry battalion does not have a TOE slot for a BMO, I didn't have much choice. In the field, he was located at the combat trains where he supervised the battalion's maintenance and recovery efforts. He also helped the S-1 run the combat trains—security, displacement, and the like.

I generally paid three visits a week to the motor pool—one during command motor stables on the first day of the week and two more to hold people to the standards the rest of the week. The program included drivers, supervisors, platoon sergeants, and platoon leaders.

As with PT, accountability proved critical. Command motor stables started off with a formation and a task and purpose briefing by the company XO. Taking an idea from the battalion XO, I had the communication platoon rig up a speaker system, and we conducted preventive maintenance checks and services by the numbers.

I originally used a decentralized approach to motor stables that was similar to my PT program in that it allowed the platoon leaders to design the training. Unlike PT, though, too many deficiencies went unreported, and I had to revert to the centralized mode.

We also conducted motor stables during FTX recovery periods. Often we encountered problems getting the staff personnel down to the motor pool because of other duties they had to complete in the staff area. These conflicts are best settled between the HHC commander and the principal staff officer.

Administration

My first sergeant screened immense quantities of paperwork before I saw it and wrote notations or highlighted signature blocks. And, of course, many soldiers with problems saw him first. If he couldn't solve a problem, it was my turn. These procedures saved precious time for a commander with more than 170 soldiers.

When we were not in the field, the first sergeant and I met in the orderly room at 0500, drank our coffee, and discussed the upcoming day's events. At 0530, he held a meeting with all the platoon sergeants, an NCO representing the S-2 and S-3 sections, the S-4 NCOIC, and the PAC supervisor. The first sergeant passed out notes, reminders, taskings, and other details that were important for that day.

I found this meeting critical in setting the proper tone for the day. It was the only time we had the NCO leaders together in this type of forum. Additionally, the meeting promoted cohesion, since the NCOs from diverse sections and platoons shared common problems and successes.

My biggest headaches were the mountains of paperwork I needed to complete, even after the first sergeant had screened it. Preparing as many pre-fabricated forms as possible was a lifesaver. For instance, with more than 170 soldiers assigned to the company, I found myself processing a soldier for separation at least once a month. I therefore had on hand all the forms for Chapters 5, 13, and 14 filled out except for the soldier's name and his problem. Additionally, soldiers in Hawaii often sent their families home early, and my first early-return-of-dependents case turned into a paperwork nightmare. After that, I had all the necessary forms instantly available.

Although my XO's primary duty was maintenance, he still helped administratively by supervising the awards program and monitoring the additional duties of the specialty platoon leaders.

Our battalion had an outstanding quarterly battalion command inspection (BCI) program that kept our areas of supply, arms room, NBC, maintenance, fire control, publications, and safety in excellent shape. I think the BCI program helped build the trust that developed between the company and the battalion staff, especially since the battalion XO was in charge of the program. None of the results went to the battalion commander, but the battalion XO expected us to fix deficiencies immediately. Consequently, my company knew there was no need to hide weaknesses and always accepted and acted upon any feedback from the inspectors on how to improve our standards. I believe this program directly caused our battalion to win the DA Supply Excellence Award that year.

Property Accountability

Every HHC commander I know who got into trouble over property accountability did so because he only went through the motions during a 10 percent inventory. Take your 10 percent monthly inventories seriously. Put them on your training schedule and hold the platoons and sections accountable. And if the staff is involved with the inventory, warn the battalion XO and S-3 in advance so they can emphasize it.

Work closely with the supply sergeant. Do not assign a lieutenant as a supply officer. This only adds an unnecessary buffer between you and the supply sergeant. Act as your own supply officer, and develop an open and honest relationship with the supply sergeant. Along with your 10 percent monthly inventories, audit your property book hand receipts and your sub-hand receipts. If they don't equal each other, fix the problem immediately. If you wait until the end of your command tenure, be ready for a massive report of survey and a month's less pay.

In summary, decentralize training; centralize administration and maintenance. Find out from your battalion commander where he wants you in the field, and then train on the tactical skills you will need to excel there. And work on a mutually supportive relationship with the battalion staff. If you do all this, you can expect to succeed as a headquarters company commander.

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